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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 006031

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TAGS: PGOV ELAB EU FR PINR SOCI ECON
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT CHIRAC HOSPITALIZED WITH "LIMITED CEREBRAL HEMORRHAGE"

Classified By: Acting Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Bruce Tu

rner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: President Jacques Chirac was admitted to a military hospital in Paris on the evening on Friday, September 2 for what doctors are calling a "minor vascular accident" that slightly impaired vision in one of his eyes. According to media reports, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin -- and the French public -- were not informed of the president's hospitalization until 12 hours later, the morning of the following day. All official statements insist that President Chirac's illness is not serious -- it is his first hospitalization in over 20 years -- and that he will soon be back on the job. However, the incident has pointedly called the public's attention to Chirac's increasing vulnerablity. Political defeat (the May 29 referendum), advancing age (he is 72), and now illness are markedly diminishing Chirac's political clout. PM de Villepin, who, in accordance with constitutional provisions, will be chairing this week's cabinet meeting in place of the President, will be making the most of Chirac's temporary sidelining to further show the public that he (Villepin) is ready for the role of president. End Summary.

Offically a Minor Vascular Accident
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¶2. (U) According to official statements, a problem with a small vein behind an eye prompted President Chirac's hospitalization on the evening of Friday, September 2. At Val-de-Grace military hospital in Paris, doctors subsequently determined that the "vascular accident" was "minor," but nonethless decided to keep President Chirac under observation for at least a week, in order to "conduct a thorough check up." France's media -- mindful of the secretiveness that in France has always surrounded the matter of the president's health -- have made much of that incongruity, and have speculated that the "minor" vascular incident may well be symptomatic of a more serious health problem. All official statements through COB September 6 have firmly insisted on the transitory nature of the president's illness, and firmly predicted that he would be back on the job within days.

Close Hold on News of Hospitalization
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¶3. Early in the day of Chirac's hospitalization (Friday, September 2), his office cancelled a number of events without giving any hint that health problems were the reason for the cancellation. The secrecy that surrounded Chirac's admission to the hospital that evening -- reportedly known only to his wife, Bernadette, his daughter (and communications director) Claude and a handful of presidential and military aides -- fueled the French media's speculation that those in the President's innermost circle, uncertain of how serious the president's condition might be, put political considerations before the public's right to know about the president's ability to perform the full range of his duties. Prime Minister de Villepin -- and the public at large -- were informed only the following day, well over twelve hours later, that the president was in the hospital, and would remain there for a week. PM de Villepin visited Chirac in the hospital on the evening of Saturday, September 4, declaring afterwards that he had found Chirac in fine form and eager to return to his presidential duties.

Long History of Excellent Health
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¶4. (C) President Chirac, at least until now, has enjoyed legendary good health despite being a chain smoker. He has always been known for his iron constitution. He was hospitalized briefly for injuries suffered in a car accident over twenty years ago. He has not been diagnosed with nor hospitalized for any health impairing condition or illness.

Comment
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¶5. (C) All official statements insist that the "limited cerebral hemorrhage" that has befallen president Chirac is

temporary in its effects, and that the president will soon be back at work. The press and public are skeptical, however, because they remember the secrecy, indeed, deception, that have characterized the handling of prior presidential illnesses (Pompidou and Mitterand) in the relatively recent past.

¶6. (C) While it is far too early to conclude that this incident is a sign of failing health, it nevertheless futher undermines any hopes Chirac may still harbor of running for a third term in 2007. Chirac has kept open the option of pursuing a third term to avoid &lame duck8 status for as long as possible. But with his political credibility already damaged as a result of French rejection of the EU constitutional treaty, voters will be tempted more than ever to conclude that Chirac has become too old for the job.

¶7. (C) Chirac's illness also sharpens the rivalry between those on the center-right vying to succeed him. PM Dominique de Villepin and Interior Minister (and President of the ruling Center for a popular Movement (UMP) party) Nicholas Sarkozy both continue to insist publicly that they make an effective working tandem and that they are putting the interests of France's economic recovery above their personal ambitions -- even as they continue marking their differences. These differences were resoundingly evident in Villepin's and Sarkozy's speeches at an important party gathering over the weekend. Villepin stressed fast-paced reform, but in the context of continuing the "French social model," whereas Sarkozy responded by calling for a "complete break" with the "politics of the past 30 years." Sarkozy also stressed that nothing and no one would derail him from carrying through on his intention to run in 2007.

¶8. (C) One immediate effect of Chirac's unforeseen illness is that it puts Villepin in the president's chair at cabinet meetings, beginning with the one scheduled for September 8. Villepin is sure to make the most of the opportunity to further enhance his image with the public as a man who's ready to take on the top job. Such replacement of the president by the prime minister is permitted under article 21 of the constitution "on an exceptional basis," "in the event of an express delegation of power," and "for a limited period."

¶9. (SBU) Chirac's illness has also prompted a review of constitutional provisions in the event of presidential incapacitation or death in office. Article 7 of the Fifth Republic's constitution provides for the continuity of presidential power. In the case of incapacitation, the powers of the presidency devolve temporarily to the President of the Senate. The Constitutional Council, meeting with a majority of its members present, can confirm permanent incapacitation. If the Council confirms permanent incapacitation or the president dies in office, then Article 7 requires that a new election must take place in not less than 20, and not more than 35 days. End Comment.
STAPLETON